

FIRST-TIMER'S GUIDE FOR PCA GA OPERATIONS

How the PCA General Assembly Actually Works

A Summary of the Rules of Assembly Operations for New Commissioners

INTRODUCTION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This guide explains the practical rules that govern how the PCA General Assembly operates. It's not the theology (that's in the Westminster Standards) or the church structure (that's in the Book of Church Order). This is the "how we actually do business" manual and is based on the RAO (Rules of Assembly Operations). The RAO is the PCA's rules for how the General Assembly conducts its work; Robert's Rules applies where the RAO does not provide otherwise.

PART 1: THE BASICS - WHAT IS GENERAL ASSEMBLY?

THE ASSEMBLY IS A CHURCH COURT

The General Assembly is the highest church court in the PCA. It's not a convention, conference, or business meeting - it's a court with judicial and legislative authority over the whole denomination.

WHO'S THERE?

- Teaching Elders (ministers) - all teaching elders in good standing with their Presbyteries
- Ruling Elders (lay elders) - elected by Sessions; each congregation is entitled to two ruling elder representatives for the first 350 communing members or fraction thereof, and one additional ruling elder for each additional 500 communing members or fraction thereof
- You are a "Commissioner" - you serve as a member of the General Assembly, not merely as an observer

WHAT DOES IT DO?

1. Reviews presbytery records (quality control)
2. Considers overtures (proposed changes to BCO or denominational policy)
3. Receives reports from agencies (MTW, MNA, Covenant College, etc.)
4. Handles judicial cases (appeals from presbyteries)
5. Elects officers and committee members
6. Sets direction for the denomination

PART 2: HOW THE ASSEMBLY OPENS

DAY ONE - OPENING SESSION (RAO 1-1 to 1-3)

1. WORSHIP SERVICE

- The retiring Moderator preaches
- The Lord's Supper is celebrated
- This isn't just ceremony - it reminds us we're a church, not a corporation

2. ROLL CALL

- The Stated Clerk reports how many commissioners are enrolled
- A quorum is declared (or not)
- Without a quorum, no business can be conducted

3. ELECTION OF MODERATOR

- First order of business
- One nominating speech per candidate (5 minutes max)
- No seconding speeches allowed
- The Moderator presides during the Assembly and until his successor is elected

PART 3: YOUR ROLE AS A COMMISSIONER

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. SPEAK FROM THE FLOOR (RAO 19-2)

- You must be recognized by the Moderator
- Wait to be called on - don't just start talking
- Address the Moderator, not other commissioners directly
- Speak to the motion, not personalities

2. MAKE MOTIONS (RAO 19-2)

- Floor motions generally must be seconded; committee recommendations do not require a second
- Motions must be germane (related to the topic at hand)
- You can't make a motion while someone else has the floor

3. VOTE (RAO 19-4)

- Most votes are by electronic devices given to the commissioner at registration
- Some votes are by voice (ayes and nays)
- If necessary votes may be by standing or roll call
- You should abstain only on matters of direct personal interest

4. SERVE ON COMMITTEES

- Prior to GA, your presbytery will determine who will serve on which committee
- You may be assigned to a Committee of Commissioners
- These meet during GA to review assigned committee or agency reports and recommendations
- Attendance is expected if you're assigned

WHAT YOU CANNOT DO:

7. You cannot speak without being recognized
8. You cannot make unlimited speeches on the same topic
9. You cannot interrupt another speaker (except for points of order/privilege)
10. You cannot vote if you are not present when the vote is taken

PART 4: OVERTURES - THE MAIN BUSINESS

WHAT IS AN OVERTURE? (RAO Article XI)

An overture is a formal proposal from a presbytery asking the General Assembly to take action. It might propose:

- A change to the Book of Church Order
- A change to the Rules of Assembly Operations
- A denominational policy or position
- Direction to an agency or committee

THE OVERTURES COMMITTEE (RAO Article XV)

This is the most important committee for understanding GA business.

COMPOSITION:

- One teaching elder and one ruling elder from each presbytery
- Elected by the presbytery from among its registered commissioners
- The Moderator designates a convener; the committee elects its own chairman and vice-chairman
- Meets before and during GA

WHAT IT DOES:

The Overtures Committee reviews overtures referred to it by the Stated Clerk, including constitutional amendments and many other overtures, and makes a recommendation:

- Approve
- Approve as Amended
- Answer by Minute (explain why we're not doing it)
- Refer to a committee for study
- Disapprove

THE PROCESS:

1. BEFORE GA

- Presbyteries ordinarily send overtures to the Stated Clerk under the RAO deadlines and procedures
- Overtures are published in the Commissioner Handbook
- You should read them before you arrive

2. DURING GA

- The Overtures Committee meets (usually Monday-Tuesday)
- Commissioners from the sending presbytery may present their case
- The committee debates and votes
- A report is prepared with recommendations

3. ON THE FLOOR

- The Overtures Committee presents its report
- The Assembly considers each Overtures Committee recommendation; debate occurs when there is objection or question
- The Assembly may vote to adopt the recommendation, vote it down, or recommit it to the Overtures Committee as permitted by the rules

WHY YOU USUALLY CANNOT AMEND AN OVERTURES COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION FROM THE FLOOR

First-timers often expect floor debate to work like an ordinary deliberative meeting where a commissioner can amend wording from the microphone. Overtures Committee recommendations are different.

- When the Overtures Committee brings a recommendation to the Assembly, the RAO does not allow ordinary floor amendments to that recommendation.
- The Assembly may act on the recommendation, vote it down, or recommit it to the Overtures Committee.
- A recommitment does not include instructions. The matter is simply recommitted, and the Overtures Committee is free to bring it back modified or not.
- If a commissioner thinks wording needs to change, the practical path is usually to work through the Overtures Committee process before the report reaches the floor.
- This is why, almost every year, someone rushes to the microphone on the first overture with an amendment and the Moderator has to explain the rule.

IMPORTANT RULES FOR OVERTURES COMMITTEE (RAO 15-6):

- Quorum: 15 teaching elders + 15 ruling elders must be present
- Only business referred by the Stated Clerk may be considered
- The chairman may not enter debate or make motions without leaving the chair, and ordinarily should not vote on a question
- Members must be recognized before speaking
- Motions must be seconded
- A motion for "Previous Question" (stop debate and vote) requires 3/4 vote
- Amendments must be germane (related to the original overture)

- Commissioners from sending presbyteries may present but not debate

MINORITY REPORTS (RAO 15-6.h):

- If 6+ committee members disagree with a recommendation, they may file a minority report
- Must be filed within 7 days of committee adjournment
- Both majority and minority reports are presented to the Assembly
- The Assembly decides which to adopt

PART 5: COMMITTEES OF COMMISSIONERS

WHAT ARE THEY? (RAO Article XIV)

These are temporary committees that meet during GA to review the work of permanent agencies and make recommendations to the Assembly.

EXAMPLES:

- Committee on Mission to the World
- Committee on Mission to North America
- Committee on Covenant College
- Committee on Reformed University Fellowship
- Committee on Administrative Committee

YOUR ROLE IF ASSIGNED:

1. ATTEND THE MEETINGS

- Usually scheduled Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning
- Check your assignment in the Commissioner Handbook

2. REVIEW THE AGENCY'S WORK

- Minutes are sent to you before GA
- The agency head will present and answer questions
- You're doing oversight, not micromanagement

3. MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS

- The committee prepares a report for the Assembly
- Usually: "We recommend the Assembly approve the work of [Agency]"
- Sometimes: specific recommendations for changes or concerns

4. PRESENT TO THE ASSEMBLY

- The committee chairman presents the report
- The Assembly votes to adopt (usually without much debate)

PART 6: REVIEW OF PRESBYTERY RECORDS (RPR)

WHAT IS IT? (RAO Article XVI)

Every year, the General Assembly reviews the minutes of every presbytery to ensure they're following the BCO correctly.

THE RPR COMMITTEE:

- One representative from each presbytery
- Elected by the presbytery
- Meets before GA (usually several months earlier)
- Reviews every presbytery's minutes

WHAT THEY LOOK FOR:

- Are sessions being examined properly?
- Are ministers being ordained/installed correctly?
- Are judicial cases being handled according to BCO?
- Are records being kept properly?

THE REPORT:

The committee reports to GA with:

- Commendations (things done well)
- Exceptions (things done wrong)
- Recommendations for correction

WHY IT MATTERS:

This is how the PCA maintains constitutional integrity across 80+ presbyteries. It's not punitive - it's accountability and teaching.

PART 7: PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

ROBERT'S RULES APPLY (RAO 19-1)

The Assembly follows Robert's Rules of Order (Newly Revised) except where the RAO specifically says otherwise.

KEY MOTIONS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

1. MAIN MOTION

"I move that we adopt the recommendation of the Overtures Committee."

- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable
- Requires majority vote

2. AMEND (GENERAL PARLIAMENTARY MOTION)

"I move to amend by striking 'shall' and inserting 'may'."

- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable (you can amend an amendment)
- Requires majority vote
- Must be germane
- Important: not every matter on the floor is amendable. Overtures Committee recommendations are governed by special RAO rules and are not amended from the floor.

3. REFER

"I move to refer this overture to the Administrative Committee for study."

- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable
- Requires majority vote

4. POSTPONE INDEFINITELY

"I move to postpone this overture indefinitely."

- This kills the overture (polite way to vote it down)
- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Requires majority vote

5. PREVIOUS QUESTION (Call the Question)

"I move the previous question."

- This stops debate and forces an immediate vote
- Requires a second
- NOT debatable
- Requires 2/3 vote
- If adopted, the Assembly votes immediately on the pending motion

6. POINT OF ORDER

"Point of order, Mr. Moderator."

- You don't need recognition - just stand and say it
- Used when you think the rules are being violated
- The Moderator rules on your point
- His ruling can be appealed to the Assembly

7. POINT OF INFORMATION

"Point of information, Mr. Moderator."

- Used to ask a question about the business at hand
- Not a speech - just a question

8. APPEAL

"I appeal the decision of the chair."

- Used when you disagree with the Moderator's ruling
- Requires a second

- Debatable (briefly)
- Requires majority vote to overturn the Moderator

VOTING METHODS (RAO 19-4):

1. VOICE VOTE (most common)

- Moderator: "All in favor say 'aye'. All opposed say 'no'."
- Moderator judges which side won

2. STANDING VOTE

- Used when voice vote is unclear
- "All in favor please stand. Be seated. All opposed please stand."
- Tellers may count if needed

3. ROLL CALL VOTE

- Used for very important or close votes
- Each commissioner's vote is recorded by name
- Takes a long time - rarely used

4. BALLOT VOTE

- Used for elections
- Secret ballot

PART 8: JUDICIAL CASES

THE STANDING JUDICIAL COMMISSION (RAO Article XVII)

WHAT IS IT?

The SJC is the commission of the General Assembly assigned to handle judicial business committed to it under the BCO and RAO.

COMPOSITION:

- 24 members
- Elected by GA and divided into four classes of three teaching elders and three ruling elders
- Judicial panels have not less than five members, ordinarily drawn by lot from the commission

WHAT CASES COME TO GA?

11. Appeals from presbytery judicial decisions
12. Complaints against presbytery actions
13. References (when a lower court asks for guidance)

YOUR ROLE:

- The SJC adjudicates cases assigned to it and reports directly to GA
- Its decision is ordinarily the final decision of GA, except in cases handled under the special minority-report procedure
- These are serious matters - listen carefully and vote thoughtfully if a matter actually comes before the Assembly
- You're not retrying the case on the floor - any GA action on SJC matters is governed by the BCO/RAO procedures

IMPORTANT: Judicial cases involve real people, real churches, and real consequences. Treat them with gravity, confidentiality, and prayer.

PART 9: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUR FIRST GA

BEFORE YOU GO:

1. READ THE COMMISSIONER HANDBOOK

- Sent to you before GA
- Contains all overtures, reports, and committee assignments
- The SempRef GA53 page also hosts this guide and other preparation resources for commissioners.
- You can't participate well if you haven't read it

2. TALK TO YOUR PRESBYTERY

- If your presbytery sent an overture, understand why
- If your presbytery sent an overture, understand what it is asking the Assembly to do
- Ask experienced commissioners for advice

3. PRAY

- This is church business, not corporate business
- Pray for wisdom, unity, and the Spirit's guidance

DURING GA:

1. ATTEND EVERYTHING

- Worship services
- Business sessions
- Committee meetings (if assigned)
- Don't skip out early or come late

2. LISTEN MORE THAN YOU SPEAK

- Especially your first time
- Learn how things work before you jump in
- When you do speak, be brief and clear
- Do not panic if the first hour feels confusing. GA procedure has its own rhythm. Listen to the Moderator, watch what question is

actually before the court, and ask experienced commissioners for help during breaks.

3. VOTE YOUR CONSCIENCE

- You are a commissioner in a church court, not a bound delegate
- Vote according to Scripture, the Standards, and your best judgment
- You'll answer to God, not just your presbytery

4. BE GRACIOUS

- You'll disagree with people
- Disagree without being disagreeable
- Remember: these are your brothers in Christ

5. TAKE NOTES

- You may need to give a brief report to your Session or church if asked
- Important votes, key debates, significant decisions
- Names of people you meet

6. NETWORK

- Meet brothers from churches and presbyteries across the PCA
- Learn what's happening in other parts of the PCA
- Build relationships - the PCA is a connectional church

AFTER GA:

1. REPORT AS APPROPRIATE

- Give a brief report to your Session or church if requested
- Explain major decisions that affect your church
- Answer questions as you are able

2. FOLLOW UP

- If GA made decisions affecting your church, implement them
- If you were assigned to a committee, complete any follow-up work

PART 10: COMMON QUESTIONS FROM FIRST-TIMERS

Q: How long does GA last?

A: GA week often includes committee work, seminars, travel, and fellowship before the Assembly formally convenes. The General Assembly itself normally begins with the Tuesday evening opening session and continues through Friday.

Q: What should I wear?

A: Dress practically and respectfully for long days of business, worship, walking, and meetings. Check the Commissioner Handbook or event information for any specific guidance.

Q: Can I bring my family?

A: Yes! There's usually programming for spouses, children, and youth. Register in advance.

Q: What if I don't understand something?

A: Ask! Raise a point of information. Talk to experienced commissioners during breaks. The Stated Clerk's office can help.

Q: What if I need to leave early?

A: Try not to. If you must, inform your presbytery and the Stated Clerk. You cannot vote if you are not present when the vote is taken.

Q: Can I propose an overture from the floor?

A: Not as ordinary floor business. General Assembly is not the place to invent an overture from the microphone. Overtures are handled through the procedures and deadlines in the RAO, ordinarily through presbyteries before GA. Sessions and individuals may have rights under the RAO in particular circumstances, but that is not the ordinary path for a first-time commissioner.

Q: Am I a delegate sent to vote the instructions of my presbytery or church?

A: No. A commissioner serves as a member of a church court. He should listen carefully, honor the courts of the church, and vote according to Scripture, the Standards, the Constitution, and his best judgment before God.

Q: What's the difference between an overture and a motion?

A: An overture is a formal request for Assembly action that ordinarily comes from a presbytery before GA. A motion is made during the Assembly and is handled under the applicable rules.

Q: Can I record the proceedings?

A: GA sessions are recorded officially. Personal recording may be restricted - check the rules in the Commissioner Handbook.

Q: What if there's a tie vote?

A: A tie vote usually means the motion fails because it has not received a majority.

Q: Can I amend an overture from the floor?

A: Usually, no. When the Overtures Committee brings a recommendation to the Assembly, the RAO does not allow ordinary floor amendments to that recommendation. The Assembly may act on the recommendation, vote it down, or recommit it to the Overtures Committee.

Q: What should I do if I think an overture needs better wording?

A: Work before the floor debate if possible. Speak with commissioners serving on the Overtures Committee, communicate with your presbytery's OC representatives, or participate through the proper committee process. Once the OC recommendation is before the Assembly, your options are more limited.

Q: What does "recommit" mean?

A: To recommit means to send the matter back to the committee. With Overtures Committee recommendations, recommitment does not include instructions. The matter is simply recommitted, and the OC is free to bring it back modified or not.

Q: What is the difference between speaking, asking a question, and making a motion?

A: Speaking argues for or against the motion. A point of information asks a question. A motion asks the Assembly to do something. The Moderator will often clarify what kind of action a commissioner is attempting.

Q: Why does the Moderator stop people at the microphone?

A: The Moderator is not merely managing time. He is guarding the rules of the Assembly. Sometimes a commissioner is out of order because the motion is not permitted, the question is not before the court, debate has not opened, or the commissioner is attempting to amend something that cannot be amended from the floor.

Q: Why are some items adopted quickly without debate?

A: Some recommendations are adopted quickly when there is no objection or question from the floor. That does not mean the Assembly is being careless; it means the rules allow routine or uncontested matters to move efficiently.

CONCLUSION: YOU'RE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

General Assembly isn't just a business meeting. It's a gathering of the church to seek God's will for His people. You're not just a delegate - you're a commissioner in a church court with real authority and real responsibility.

The rules in this guide exist to help the Assembly conduct business decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40). They're not red tape - they're guardrails that protect the church from hasty decisions, ensure everyone is heard, and maintain our constitutional integrity.

Your first GA will be overwhelming. That's normal. You'll hear debates about things you've never thought about. You'll vote on matters that affect thousands of churches. You'll meet brothers from across the country and around the world.

Take it seriously. Take notes. Ask questions. Pray constantly. And remember: you are serving the King and Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God grant you wisdom, courage, and grace as you serve His church.

APPENDIX: QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

KEY DOCUMENTS YOU NEED:

- Commissioner Handbook (read before you go)
- Book of Church Order (digital access)
- Westminster Standards (digital access)
- Bible
- This guide
- Notepad and pen

KEY PEOPLE TO KNOW:

- Moderator - runs the Assembly
- Stated Clerk - keeps records, manages logistics
- Parliamentarian - advises on procedure
- Other commissioners from your church and presbytery, plus experienced commissioners who can help

KEY COMMITTEES:

- Overtures Committee - reviews overtures referred to it by the Stated Clerk
- Review of Presbytery Records - reviews presbytery minutes
- Committees of Commissioners - review agency reports
- Standing Judicial Commission - handles appeals

KEY VOTES:

- Majority (more than half) - most motions
- 2/3 (two-thirds) - previous question, suspend rules
- BCO amendments - majority at GA, two-thirds of Presbyteries, then majority at a subsequent GA

KEY MOTIONS:

- Main Motion - "I move that..."
- Amend - "I move to amend by..."

- Refer - "I move to refer to..."
- Previous Question - "I move the previous question" (stops debate)
- Point of Order - "Point of order, Mr. Moderator"
- Appeal - "I appeal the decision of the chair"

WHEN IN DOUBT:

- Ask a point of information
- Talk to experienced commissioners during breaks
- Consult the Stated Clerk's office
- Pray and vote your conscience

This guide is not an official PCA document. It's a practical summary of the Rules of Assembly Operations for first-time commissioners. For official rules, consult the Book of Church Order and Rules of Assembly Operations.

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Soli Deo Gloria